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SUBJECT: OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL: STATEMENT ON LAW ON
RELIGION IN TAJIKISTAN

1. Post is authorized to make the following statement at the
April 2, 2009, meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council in
Vienna:

Begin Text:

Mr. Chairman,

The United States joins the EU in expressing our deep regret
that Tajik President Rahmon on March 25 signed into law
highly restrictive legislation on freedom of conscience and
religious associations. Numerous provisions in the law
violate Tajikistan's OSCE commitments on freedom of belief
and assembly.

In particular, the United States is concerned that the law
gives excessive power to the state to control the activities
of religious associations. Provisions in the law would
dramatically increase the membership threshold to register a
religious organization, tighten censorship of religious
publications, restrict the conduct of religious rites to
officially-approved places of worship, constrain children's
religious activities and education, require state permission
for contact with foreign co-believers, and would make the
appointment of imams and activities of mosques vulnerable to
political interference. Taken as a whole, this law paints a
dim picture of religious tolerance in Tajikistan.

Although various versions of the legislation have been
discussed over the last two years, we are aware of only a few
instances where the concerns of religious groups,
non-governmental organizations or international experts
*including the ODIHR Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion
*were taken into account. We also understand that both
houses of parliament passed the religion law without any
substantial debate, due in part to the unwillingness of
parliament to make the most recent draft of the law available
for full public scrutiny.

The United States fully understands concerns about religious
extremism and the need to address this issue comprehensively.
We believe, however, that this law will stifle freedom of
religion, isolate minority religious groups, and possibly
foment further extremism. Moreover, excessive government
intrusion undermines our shared undertakings, including that
undertaken in Copenhagen in 1990, to "recognize and respect
the freedom of the individual to profess and practice, alone
or in community with others, religion or belief acting in
accordance with the dictates of his own conscience."

We hope the Tajik Mission to the OSCE will relay these
concerns to authorities in Dushanbe, and we appeal to the
government to ensure continued religious tolerance in the
country. We encourage the Tajik authorities to take
advantage of assistance offered by the OSCE Office in
Tajikistan and the ODIHR on interpreting and implementing
this and other legislation.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

End text.
CLINTON